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Allegiances

THUNDERCLAN

Leader: Sandstar - Large light ginger tabby tom with a white tail-tip and paws, and amber eyes.
Deputy: Duskfur - Sleek black tom with a white tail-tip and paws, and yellow eyes.
Medicine Cat: Maplefrost - Sleek dark brown tabby she-cat with a white belly and yellow eyes.

Warriors:
Oaktail - Muscular brown tabby tom with black stripes and yellow eyes.
Apprentice: Patchpaw
Flowerfoot - Beautiful fiery ginger she-cat with amber eyes, a striped tail, and one black paw.
Apprentice: Mousepaw
Fernheart - Small silver tabby she-cat with light green eyes.
Apprentice: Daisypaw
Nutfur - Long-furred brown tabby tom with green eyes and a white patch on his chest.
Eaglepelt - Large golden-brown tabby tom with a white tail, paws, belly, chest, and muzzle, and amber eyes.
Apprentice: Ashpaw
Pineleaf - Pretty brown and white she-cat with amber eyes and white stripes on her tail.
Cinderclaw - Muscular dark gray tom with light blue eyes.
Owlfeather - Lithe smoky gray tom with amber eyes and white paws.
Ambercloud - Slender golden tabby she-cat with light blue eyes and

a white tail, belly, chest, face, and legs.
Apprentice: Rainpaw
Voletail - Long-tailed silver tabby-and-white tom with pale blue eyes.
Berryheart - Muscular ginger tabby tom with green eyes and a white tail-tip.
Dawnfur - Long-furred light ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes.
Briartooth - Large brown tom with amber eyes and white paws.

Apprentices:
Daisypaw - Small golden and white she-cat with amber eyes.
Mousepaw - Slender gray tom with light blue eyes and a white belly, chest, and legs.
Patchpaw - Thin gray and white tom with amber eyes.
Ashpaw - Thick-furred gray tom with a white chest, belly, paws, and tail-tip, and light blue eyes.
Rainpaw - Lithe brown and white she-cat with tabby markings on her forehead and amber eyes.

Queens:
Goldenheart - Small, slender golden tabby she-cat with a white belly, chest, paws, muzzle, and tail-tip, and light green eyes. Mother of Larkkit (golden tabby she-cat), Tigerkit (light ginger tabby she-cat), and Nightkit (black she-cat).
Frostface - Long-furred white she-cat with light green eyes and a very long tail. Mother of Sunkit (light brown tabby tom) and Snowkit (white tom).

Elders:
Leafshade - Long-furred golden-brown she-cat with darker legs, black ears, and amber eyes.
Cherrypelt - Long-legged tortoiseshell she-cat with a white chest, belly, legs, and tail-tip, and yellow eyes.
Silverstripe - Slender silver tabby she-cat with amber eyes and a very long tail.

RIVERCLAN

Leader: Reedstar - Large silver tabby tom with green eyes and white paws.
Deputy: Willowwind - Lithe light gray tom with orange eyes and

darker paws.
Apprentice: Shrewpaw (tiny gray she-cat with a white tail-tip and blue eyes)
Medicine Cat: Lilybreath - Sleek ginger and white she-cat with pale blue eyes.
Apprentice: Breezepaw (pretty silver tabby she-cat with a white muzzle and paws, and amber eyes)

Warriors:
Frogpelt - Muscular tortoiseshell tabby tom with a white muzzle and belly and yellow eyes.
Apprentice: Icepaw (small white she-cat with gray paws and green eyes)
Stonefang - Large dark gray tom with blue eyes and a white lower jaw.
Apprentice: Dewpaw (sturdy, thick-furred white she-cat with yellow eyes and light brown flecks on her legs)
Stormclaw - Sleek white she-cat with pale gray legs, tail, ears, and nose, and amber eyes.
Minnowtail - Small blue-gray she-cat with light blue eyes and white paws.
Ripplefur - Large dark gray tabby tom with a white chest, belly, paws, muzzle, and tail-tip, and amber eyes.
Apprentice: Applepaw (willowy brown tabby she-cat with a white belly, legs, tail-tip, chest, and face, and light blue eyes)
Cloudeyes - Thick-furred white she-cat with very pale blue eyes.
Fireleaf - Large ginger tom with a white tail-tip and amber eyes.
Mudstep - Well-muscled brown tabby tom with a white belly and paws, and yellow eyes.
Spottedpelt - Small tortoiseshell tom with white front legs and light blue eyes.
Heronheart - Sleek blue-gray she-cat with yellow eyes and a white patch on her chest.

Queens:
Fogwhisker - Slender gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes and a white tail-tip. Mother of Splashkit (gray tabby she-cat) and Willowkit (dark gray tom).
Creekfur - Sleek white she-cat with light tawny legs, ears, and tail, and green eyes.

Elders:
Fallingsnow - Lithe white she-cat with dark blue eyes and very long whiskers.
Smoketail - Sleek dark gray tom with orange eyes and a darker tail and paws.
Mossfoot - Sleek tortoiseshell tabby she-cat with white paws and green eyes.
Wetfeather - Sleek, slender gray tabby tom with white legs and amber eyes.

SHADOWCLAN

Leader: Mothstar - Large, sleek light gray she-cat with darker flecks on her legs, a black-striped tail, and piercing light blue eyes.
Deputy: Robinclaw - Muscular reddish-brown tom with dull green eyes and a white chest, belly, and paws.
Medicine Cat: Roseheart - Long-tailed dark ginger tabby she-cat with a white chest & belly, and amber eyes.

Warriors:
Toadbite - Large dark brown tabby she-cat with a white tail-tip and orange eyes.
Apprentice: Bramblepaw
Pineclaw - Stout dark ginger tabby tom with white paws and amber eyes.
Marshfur - Bulky dark brown tabby tom with black stripes, one white paw, and amber eyes.
Crowtail - Tall, sleek black tom with a very long tail and golden eyes.
Apprentice: Graypaw (long-legged, well-muscled dark gray tom with a darker stripe down his spine, one white paw, and pale yellow eyes)
Nettlethorn - Fluffy dark gray tom with fiery amber eyes and a black spot on his nose.
Apprentice: Newtpaw (sleek dark brown she-cat with faint tabby stripes and amber eyes)
Brightwing - Sleek white she-cat with yellow eyes and gray paws.
Shadecloud - Long-legged gray she-cat with a white belly and light blue eyes and a black stripe running down her spine.
Snakepelt - Well-muscled dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice: Ratpaw (large dark brown tabby tom with black stripes, white paws, and yellow eyes)
Skinkstripe - Sleek dark ginger tabby tom with light green eyes.
Apprentice: Adderpaw (muscular white tom with large dark brown spots on his back and the top of his head, and amber eyes)
Scartail - Large dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes and white paws; missing half of his tail.
Talonclaw - Muscular dark brown tabby she-cat with orange eyes and a white chest & tail-tip.

Queens:
Rowanheart - Thick-furred russet she-cat with a white chest and paws, and yellow eyes. Mother of Copperkit (light reddish-brown she-cat), Badgerkit (black tom), and Russetkit (russet tom).
Blackleaf - Sleek black she-cat with white front paws and pale blue eyes. Mother of Darkkit (black tom) and Flamekit (dark orange she-cat).
Quailwing - Small but sturdy dark ginger tabby she-cat with white legs and orange eyes. Expecting kits.

Elders:
Ashfeather - Sleek dark gray tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.
Foxstorm - Thick-furred dark ginger tabby tom with light green eyes and white paws.
Waspwing - Large dark brown tabby tom with black stripes, white paws, and unusual pale blue eyes.

WINDCLAN

Leader: Stagstar - Long-legged dark brown tom with yellow eyes and a darker tail, legs, and ears.
Deputy: Liontail - Long-furred golden she-cat with pale blue eyes and a white chest, belly, & paws.
Medicine Cat: Runningshadow - Slender gray tom with a black tail and amber eyes.
Apprentice: Frostpaw(long-tailed pale gray tabby tom with amber eyes)

Warriors:
Moorwhisker - Small light ginger tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.

Apprentice: Wrenpaw (long-legged gray tabby she-cat with a white muzzle and green eyes)
Rabbitleap - Lithe but muscular brown tabby tom with yellow eyes and very long legs.
Kestrelwing - Tall ginger tabby tom with a white belly and blue eyes.
Apprentice: Brightpaw (slender, short-furred pale ginger she-cat with pale blue eyes)
Grasspelt - Long-furred pale brown she-cat with yellow eyes.
Blossomfur - Sleek ginger she-cat with large green eyes and white paws.
Gorseclaw - Small, long-furred light brown tom with blue eyes and one black paw.
Apprentice: Sweetpaw (thick-furred dark gray she-cat with blue eyes and white paws)
Pooleyes - Sleek-furred gray tabby she-cat with a white tail-tip and pale blue eyes.
Fenneltail - Pretty light gray she-cat with amber eyes.
Apprentice: Littlepaw (tiny black tom with amber eyes and a white tail-tip)
Mistcloud - Large dark gray tabby tom with a white muzzle, torn ears, and yellow eyes.
Apprentice: Pouncepaw (sleek gray tabby she-cat with large green eyes)
Colddawn - Slender white she-cat with ginger paws and yellow eyes.
Heatherfoot - Small brown tabby she-cat with dark amber eyes and a white chest.
Soilpelt - Sleek brown tabby tom with dark, hazy stripes and yellow eyes.
Weaselheart - Slender, long-bodied tawny she-cat with green eyes.
Sparrowflight - Wiry pale brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes.
Whiteflower - Fluffy snow-white she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Queens:
Thistleblossom - Long-furred dark brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes and white paws; mother of Dawnkit (ginger tabby she-cat), Harekit (brown tabby tom), and Yarrowkit (white she-cat).
Milkpelt - Pretty cream-colored she-cat with amber eyes and a white chest. Mother of Mudkit (brown she-cat) and Stormkit (gray

tom).
Sootstep - Long-legged gray she-cat with pale blue eyes and a very pink nose; expecting kits.

Elders:
Beetleclaw - Very old black tom with blind yellow eyes and white toes.
Skybird - Skinny gray she-cat with a silvering muzzle and green eyes.
Snowsong - Long-furred white she-cat with pale green eyes.
Stonewhisker - Short-haired, sleek dark gray tom with blue eyes and unusually long whiskers.

Prologue

A pair of lithe shapes moved in the moonlight, slipping through the dark foliage like shadows. Rays of silver fell upon gray fur- the pelt of one of the cats was long and fluffy, while the other was short and thick. The pair stopped as they came to a clearing, and the long-haired she-cat cast an uncertain glance over her shoulder, uncertainty glowing in her ice-blue eyes.

"This is the farthest I've ever gone," she meowed to her partner, the tip of her tail twitching. "Everything past here is unknown."

"That's all part of the excitement, isn't it?" the tom asked, pressing his pelt comfortingly against hers. "Past here, there are no boundaries to hold us back. To keep us apart." He gave her a gentle nuzzle, pausing for a moment to gaze at her lovingly. Then he stepped forward, flicking her on the ear with his tail. "Come on, we should go before any patrols catch up with us."

The she-cat nodded, letting out a quiet sigh as she cast another glance over her shoulder. This was it... the last time she would ever see the place she was born. She thought about everything she was leaving behind... but as she turned her attention back to the tom, who had paused halfway across the field to wait for her with his pelt bleached and illuminated by the moon and concern shining in his amber eyes, she knew it was worth it. She allowed a soft purr to rumble in her throat, forgetting the shadowed forest behind her as she bounded across the star-lit meadow to join her lover.

The two traveled for most of the night, leaping over rocks and fallen trees, crossing gullies and ditches filled with stagnant water, and skirting around the acrid fox-scent that occasionally sullied the fragrant night air. As the sky began to grow pale in the east, heralding the arrival of a new day, they finally decided to stop. They found an old burrow that was dug beneath the roots of a twisted pine- checking to make sure the den was free of cat-scent first- and curled up inside. There was no moss as cushion, and both found it difficult to sleep without the gentle snoring of their

Clanmates around them. Still, with their pelts pressed together for warmth and comfort, both were eventually lulled to sleep.

A while later, the she-cat found herself standing in a forest glen, surrounded by soft ferns and twisted brambles. Above, the dark canopy of the trees covered the sky, but between the swaying branches she could see the twinkling of countless stars- more than she had ever seen in her life. Despite the darkness of the forest, the glen seemed to be lit by moonlight, but she couldn't seem to find its source as she turned in circles.

Fox-dung! she cursed to herself. *We must have slept all day.* She turned again, meaning to slip back into the burrow to wake her mate, but then realized that it was nowhere to be found. This wasn't anywhere near where they had gone to sleep. Suddenly, fear closed around her heart like an icy claw. "Where am I?" she asked out loud, spinning in circles as she tried to remember how she had gotten there.

"Safe," replied a voice. The she-cat spun around again to see a sleek pale gray she-cat sitting at the edge of the glen, her pelt shaded by the ferns. A black-striped tail was curled neatly over her paws, and pale eyes seemed to pierce into the younger she-cat's very being. Starlight seemed to glow on her fur, despite the shade in which she sat.

"Y-you're StarClan," the younger cat gasped in awe, taking a step back. Then, something seemed to dawn on her. "A-am I dead? Are... are we both dead?"

The older she-cat let out a purr. "I assure you, you are both very safe both here and in the living world. However," her tone grew more serious, "the same cannot be said for your former Clanmates. From either Clan."

The younger cat froze, staring. "W-what do you mean?"

"Great change is coming to both Clans. An ending, and a new beginning." The she-cat flicked her tail. "This change will come no matter what... but you and him, cats with paws in both Clans, can see past old rivalries and ease the process. You can prevent many

unnecessary deaths, and begin to repair the damage that has been done."

The living cat blinked, not understanding. "But... there's no way we can be together if we go back," she pleaded. "This is the only way."

The pale gray cat blinked in sympathy. "You know that's not true. You are willing to give up so much for him... even your own Clan. But that doesn't mean you have to abandon the path of a warrior, the only path you were ever meant to walk."

The young cat let out a sigh. "M-maybe you're right...." She shook her head, lowering her gaze, and her voice to a whisper. "What will my mother think, though?"

The older cat let out a purr. "She will understand. Perhaps not at first, but with time. She was always a cat with two different paths, and a paw outside her Clan's boundaries. She understands the meaning of choice, and doing what one *must* do for the greater good."

The other she-cat nodded, seeming to come to a decision. "Very well, then. I will do what I have to do."

The older she-cat purred, looking pleased as she got to her paws. The younger cat shrank back as the elder approached her- only now, as she stood before her, did she realize the StarClan cat's massive size. "Go now, and waste no sunlight. Only you can quell the storm that's brewing, and bring starlight back to the shadows." She dipped her head, touching it to the younger she-cat's head. The younger cat froze as a feeling like ice shot through her, forcing her eyes shut as visions flashed in the back of her mind. Cats snarling and rolling in a blood-soaked clearing, the bodies of the fallen littering the ground. A massive tom standing over the body of a fallen warrior, yowling his victory to the sky even as a bolt of lightning arched towards him. A gray tom- not her mate, but who looked so very similar- standing between another tom and the prone body of a pale she-cat, and a powerful tortoiseshell tom. The young she-cat let out a gasp as the tortoiseshell raked his claws across the gray tom's eyes, and the vision faded.

"W-what does it mean?" the young she-cat demanded as she opened her eyes again, but now everything was dark. She was back in the burrow, her lover curled up next to her.

"Hm? What are you on about," he muttered, raising his head and blinking sleepily. His gaze sharpened with worry as he saw her bristling pelt, and the fear in her eyes. For a moment, she only stared at him, unsure of how to explain. Then, finally, she answered breathlessly:

"We have to go back."

Chapter One

[image]

A shadow moved through the grass, gray fur blending with the swaying patterns of darkness hiding from the morning sun as the animal slowly stalked a pair of much smaller creatures that moved in an open patch a few tail-lengths away. The shadow paused as it reached the edge of the grass, lowering further and rocking its haunches from side to side as it prepared to pounce. Its quarry continued to move about unsuspecting that it was being hunted, and as one of the creatures paused to scratch at the root of a bramble bush, the hunter saw its opening. Launching itself from the grass, it landed on the dirt in front of the larger of the two creatures, who let out a surprised squeak.

"Ashkit!" the smaller kit exclaimed disdainfully as the 'attacker' rolled onto his back, laughing at the frightened look on the younger kit's face.

"I gotcha!" the gray kit meowed, rolling playfully and digging the claws of his white paws into the dirt as he looked between the two younger kits. "Neither of you suspected a thing!"

"To be fair, it wasn't like we thought we needed to keep an eye out," the larger of the younger kits- a jet-black she-kit who was surprisingly sleek and slender for her young age- retorted, bending her head to lick the white patch of fur on her chest in embarrassment.

"A warrior *always* stays alert," Ashkit replied coyly, rolling onto his stomach and flicking a few shreds of decaying leaf from his ear. The smaller of the two younger kits- a small she-kit with pale golden-ginger fur and faint tabby stripes- opened her mouth to reply in defense of her sister, but before she could, another shape launched out of the brambles.

"Vengeance!" the fourth kit- another she-cat who resembled the tabby in most ways, though her fur was much darker and much

redder- shouted as she landed squarely on Ashkit's shoulders, earning a surprised huff from the older kit and guffawing laughter from her sisters. Both recovered from their amusement quicker than Ashkit did from his surprise and joined the darker tabby in her attack on the older kit, burying the gray tom in a mound of soft fur.

The group struggled for a few moments before Ashkit managed to untangle himself, hopping away with disheveled fur and a disdainful look. "That's not fair! There's more of you than me!" he complained, his tail-tip twitching.

"And you're bigger than us," the lighter tabby she-kit replied, shaking the sand out of her fur and sitting neatly, her expression amused as she looked at the older kit.

"That'll teach you to mess with she-cats!"

The new voice surprised the others, and the black she-kit whirled around with her fur bristling slightly, as if expecting another sneak attack. However, the newcomer- a brown and white she-cat about the same age as the tom- walked up to them calmly, her whiskers twitching in amusement.

"Yeah, what Rainkit said!" the darker tabby she-kit meowed, sticking her tongue out at Ashkit. Rainkit let out another amused purr, flicking the younger kit on the shoulder with her tail. Then she returned her gaze to the gray tom, excitement suddenly visible in her eyes.

"I just overheard Cinderclaw and Pineleaf talking," she meowed. "They said Briarpaw passed his assessment, and Sandstar's going to give him his warrior name at sunset."

Ashkit blinked. "That's cool. I wouldn't think you'd be all that excited about *that* though," he meowed, tilting his head. "I assume there's more?"

Rainkit nodded, casting a glance at the younger kits, who were listening in on the conversation curiously. "Yeah. It's a surprise though, for them at least," she meowed. "Larkkit, Nightkit, Tigerkit! You should go play with Sunkit and Snowkit for a moment while I

talk to Ashkit."

"Aaaw, but I wanna know the exciting news!" the ginger tabby complained.

"It's alright, you'll see soon enough, Tigerkit," Rainkit replied. "Go on. You should go tell Sunkit and Snowkit about Briarpaw. That'll be the first warrior ceremony they'll ever see!"

Tigerkit looked like she wanted to protest, but her the paler tabby she-kit- Larkkit- cut her off by flicking a fluffy tail across her sister's muzzle. "Yeah, let's go find them. I would hate for them to miss the ceremony."

"Uuuuuuugh, fine," Tigerkit groaned. "Come on, Nightkit." The black she-cat, who had been watching the exchanged with amusement from the sidelines, got to her paws and trotted after her sisters as they headed brushed past the older cats and out of the fern glen. Beyond the small, secluded patch among the ferns was a much larger clearing, filled with many cats. Most lazed around in the sun, as it was the warmest part of the day and, for the time being, all the patrols were completed. A few, however, appeared to be busy: a pair of adult cats padded entered the clearing carrying prey, which they dropped in a pile in the shade of a large boulder, while a large brown tabby stood lecturing a younger gray-and-white tom- perhaps a few moons older than Rainkit and Ashkit- while a trio of elderly she-cats helped each other to groom in a patch of sunlight nearby.

"Where do you think they are?" Tigerkit asked, surveying the clearing with curiosity in her yellow eyes.

"Probably napping with Frostface," Nightkit replied, heading towards a dense bramble bush and flicking her tail for the others to follow. "They're only a moon old, so you know how quickly they tire."

"Yeah, you can barely play with them because they're so squeaky and fragile," Tigerkit muttered, rolling her eyes. "I don't know what Rainkit's thinking."

"But they're so cute," Larkkit purred, bouncing a little. "Do you think we were that cute when we were their age?"

"Of course we were!" Tigerkit replied, looking affronted at any suggestion they might not have been.

"I don't know what you two are talking about," Nightkit put in with a flick of her tail and a gleam in her eye. "I'm *still* cute!" By now, the trio had reached the nursery- a large, dense bramble bush woven with other twigs and leaves, as well as soft down, to insulate and protect it from the outside. Nightkit squeezed through the narrow entrance, while her two sisters waited outside, shuffling their paws with boredom.

"What do you think that Rainkit wanted to tell Ashkit?" Larkkit meowed to Tigerkit as they waited, her voice colored with both curiosity and concern. Tigerkit shrugged in response.

"Who knows?" She let out a mischievous purr. "Whatever it was, it was secret... maybe they snuck out of camp and something happened!"

Larkkit's pale green eyes widened at the suggestion. "Rainkit would never do something like that!" she gasped. "It's against the rules!"

Tigerkit shrugged again. "Maybe just Ashkit did. Maybe he'll get in trouble." Larkkit blinked, considering that suggestion.

"Maybe...."

"Will you two stop gossiping like a pair of queens?"

Nightkit's voice from the entrance of the nursery made both of them start in surprise. Neither of them had realized she had returned, as her black fur blended perfectly with the darkness within- only her yellow eyes, and the tiny white patch on her chest, were visible.

"We were just talking about what Rainkit was trying to tell Ashkit," Tigerkit replied. Nightkit twitched her whiskers.

"I know exactly what you were talking about, I could hear from inside." She shrugged. "Either way, I'm sure we'll find out soon

enough." Then she glanced at the nursery. "Anyways, we were right about Sunkit and Snowkit. Frostface said she'll tell them when they wake up. She doesn't want them to miss the ceremony either."

Tigerkit nodded, then glanced at the sky. "It's only just after sunhigh now," she meowed. "We still have a while before dusk. What should we do until then?"

"I wanna play badger!" Nightkit replied, let out a growl and leaping on her sister. "And you're it!"

The two she-kits tumbled around for a few moments, let out fake snarls as they batted at each other with soft paws. Larkkit watched with amusement, before turning her attention to the ferns at the edge of the camp. A dark tunnel led beneath them, to a sunny clearing on the other side.

"I'll be back in a bit," the pale tabby told her littermates. "I wanted to talk to Maplefrost about something." Nightkit stopped wrestling for a moment- Tigerkit still swiping at her fluffy tail and letting out low growls- and stared at her sister curiously.

"About what?" she asked, tilting her head.

"Just, something!" Larkkit replied, trotting towards the ferns.

Sunset couldn't come soon enough for the Clan, which had awaited eagerly from sunhigh to see Sandstar make the newest warrior of ThunderClan. Without an announcement, most of the cats had gathered in the clearing, surrounding the massive boulder which dominated one side of the camp. As the sun dipped well below the treeline and painted the sky with pinks and yellows, finally a massive light ginger tabby emerged from the cave below the rocks, brushing aside the lichen before leaping to the top of the stone with one powerful jump.

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey should join us here beneath the Highrock for a meeting!" he yowled, his voice thundering through the camp. Most cats were already gathered, but a few more slipped from the deepening shadows, their eyes glittering with excitement, to join their Clanmates. Tigerkit,

Nightkit, and Larkkit waited just outside the nursery, their mother Goldenheart by their side. Frostface waited just inside the entrance, two tiny pale-colored toms peering out with uncertainty.

"Most of you have heard by now why it is we are gathering tonight," he began, looking around the clearing until his gaze fell upon a young brown tom, who sat proudly at the edge of the clearing next to an older, smaller smoky gray tom. "Briarpaw, come forward." The brown tom got to his paws, the gray cat giving his a friendly flick on the shoulder with his tail, and made his way through the crowd to the base of Highrock. Behind them, Frostface let out a loud purr; Larkkit remembered that Briarpaw was also her son from an earlier litter.

"Today, you proved beyond doubt that you are ready to become a warrior." Turning his gaze to the sky, Sandstar called out: "I, Sandstar, leader of ThunderClan, now call upon my warrior ancestors to look down upon this apprentice. He has trained hard to learn the ways of your noble code, and I commend him to a warrior in his turn." Now, he turned his gaze back to Briarpaw, who waited below with his chest puffed out with pride, but a nervous glint in his eyes.

"Briarpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and to protect and defend this Clan even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." Briarpaw's voice wavered with emotion as he said so.

"Then by the power of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Briarpaw, from this moment forward, you shall be known as Briartooth. StarClan honors your bravery and honesty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan." With that, Sandstar slid down from the rock to land surprisingly lightly on the dusty ground below. He rested his head on the newly-named Briartooth's, who licked his shoulder respectfully before stepping back.

As Briartooth turned to face his Clanmates, they began to cheer his name. For a moment the young warrior looked shy, but then he raised his head proudly, basking in the praise. Frostface called loudest of all, even from the confines of the nursery.

As their voices faded, the cats began to disperse, going back to their fresh-kill and conversations from before. As some cats got to their paws to resume their duties, Sandstar raised his tail, letting out a yowl to get their attention once more.

"Wait! Before you go, there is one more thing to see to."

Cats sat back down, looking curious as to what it could be. Murmuring spread through the camp as cats speculated, and a few cast glances towards the nursery as Sandstar hopped back onto the Highrock. Larkkit, who had been wondering where Ashkit and Rainkit had been throughout the ceremony, suddenly realized what it was Rainkit had wanted to tell her brother earlier.

"Now that Briartooth has left the apprentices' den, it is time to invite to more young cats to take his place," Sandstar meowed. "Rainkit, Ashkit, come forward."

Larkkit craned her neck to see as the other cats' heads turned toward one edge of camp, where the two kits had been waiting with their parents, Pineleaf and Cinderclaw. Ashkit trotted forward proudly, his chest puffed out, while Rainkit came forward looking far more self-conscious. They stopped in the shadow of Highrock, and as they gazed up at the powerful figure of Sandstar perched on top, even Ashkit managed to find his humility, lowering his blue eyes to his paws.

"Ashkit," Sandstar began, beckoning the young tom forward with his white-tipped tail. Ashkit cast a quick glanced upwards at Sandstar, looking surprised that he was to go first, and took a step ahead of his sister. "You have reached your sixth moon, and are ready to begin your training as a warrior of ThunderClan," the tabby tom continued, fixing his gaze firmly on Ashkit. "From this day forward, until you earn your warrior name, you shall be known as Ashpaw. Eaglepelt, you will mentor Ashpaw," Sandstar meowed, finally looking up. A golden-brown tom had been waiting eagerly on the sidelines, and now padded forward to stand by Ashkit, who looked very tiny next to the massive cat. "Silverstripe taught you well, and I know you will pass on your courage and loyalty to this young apprentice."

Eaglepelt dipped his head to Sandstar before turning to touch noses with Ashpaw. The young gray tom looked terrified as he stretched his neck to greet his new mentor, and the two stepped back to allow Sandstar's attention to focus on Rainkit.

"Rainkit, you have reached your sixth moon, and are ready to begin your training as a warrior of ThunderClan," Sandstar echoed, now gazing intently at the tiny brown-and-white she-cat. "From this day forward, until you earn your warrior name, you shall be known as Rainpaw. Ambercloud, you are ready for your first apprentice. Oaktail trained you well, and I hope that you will pass on your wit and selflessness to this apprentice."

A slender she-cat- who looked remarkably like Larkkit and her mother, Goldenheart- got to her paws and happily trotted over to Rainpaw, ducking her head to touch noses with the young she-cat, who looked relieved at who her mentor would be. The two stepped back, looking up at Sandstar.

"Briartooth," Sandstar meowed, looking across the clearing at the newly named tom. "You will begin your vigil now, and will not speak until dawn. That is all; the meeting is over." With that, the powerful tom leaped back down from Highrock, and his Clanmates began to get to their paws and disperse. Briartooth nodded proudly as his Clanmates congratulated him, though as Sandstar had ordered he did not speak.

"So *that's* what you were keeping secret all day!" Tigerkit exclaimed as Ashpaw and Rainpaw bounded over to them excitedly.

"I wanted it to be a surprise," Rainpaw meowed, twitching her whiskers at Tigerkit's offended expression.

"It's too bad we won't be sharing a den anymore, though," Larkkit put in, ignoring the way Tigerkit continued to glower pettily. Rainpaw shrugged.

"You're only two moons younger than us. We'll be in the same den again before long," she reassured her. Larkkit shuffled her paws uncertainly.

"Yeah, well... I have a surprise too," she admitted. "Remember how I went to talk to Maplefrost earlier?"

"No," Ashpaw replied, earning a glare from Nightkit.

"Yeah, I do remember that. Is it about what I think it is?" she asked, her eyes round.

Larkkit nodded. "Yes. She agreed... I'm going to become a medicine cat apprentice instead of a warrior."

"That's so cool!" Rainpaw purred, giving Larkkit a friendly nudge. "I would never be able to learn all those smelly herbs, or deal with warriors whining about thorns in their paws. But, to be able to speak with StarClan themselves...." she let out a wistful sigh.

"Yeah, congratulations," Ashpaw put in, though something in his tone told Larkkit he wasn't as happy about it as Rainpaw seemed to be. Before Larkkit had time to ponder why that could be, however, Tigerkit spoke up.

"Well *I'm* going to be the best warrior ThunderClan has ever seen!" she boasted, puffing out her chest. "And I'll have a really cool warrior name, like... like...." She scrunched her face for a moment, thinking hard. "Like Tigerroar!"

"Well *I'm* going to be the *leader* of ThunderClan," Nightkit replied smugly. "And then I'll have an even better name because I'll be Night*star*."

"Not if I become Ashstar first!" Ashpaw interjected playfully.

"Now now, I'm sure you'll all do great things someday," Goldenheart meowed with an amused expression, giving Nightkit a gentle nudge. "StarClan has brilliant paths laid out for all of you, I can already see."

"Even me?" Rainpaw meowed, her amber eyes wide.

"Even you," Goldenheart purred. "Now go on, I'm sure Eaglepelt and Ambercloud want to talk to you about your first day of training tomorrow." She flicked Rainpaw on the flank with her tail, and

nudged Ashpaw with her nose towards where their mentors were waiting patiently on the other side of camp. As the two new apprentices bounded away, Goldenheart called to her own three kits.

"Come on, darlings, we should get some sleep."

"But it's barely after sunset!" Tigerkit complained. "I'm not sleepy yet!"

"You'll be able to sleep once you lay down," Goldenheart replied, nudging the kits into the den. "It's been a long and exciting day."

Larkkit nodded, stifling a yawn as they entered the warm interior of the nursery. *Yes it has been. And I'm sure there are plenty more long and exciting days to come.*

Chapter Two

[image]

Swift gusts of wind swept across the moor as Larkpaw stood staring, wide-eyed at the sight. The greens and yellows of the grasses, dappled with flowers and occasional stones, seemed to stretch on forever, until the swaying grass seemed to blur with the gray sky above.

"It's... so big," the young she-cat whispered, awestruck by the sheer size of the moor. She had never imagined the whole world to be that big, let alone the territory of one Clan.

Next to her, Maplefrost let out an amused purr. "ThunderClan's territory is just as big, you know."

Larkpaw turned to stare up at her soon-to-be mentor, shocked. "Is it really?"

The brown tabby nodded. "Of course. You just... can't see as much of it at once. You'll see for yourself soon enough."

The younger she-cat opened her mouth to say something else, but before she could she was interrupted by a loud yowl from down the hill. Looking over their shoulders, the ThunderClan cats could see the shapes of two more cats down below: a sleek-furred ginger and white she-cat, followed closely by a smaller silver tabby.

"That's Lilybreath and Breezepaw, from RiverClan," Maplefrost explained, raising her tail to greet the two newcomers as they bounded up the hill to join Maplefrost and Larkpaw. The older she-cat, who Larkpaw could only assume was Lilybreath, dipped her head in greeting to Maplefrost. Larkpaw wrinkled her nose as the scent of fish and riverwater washed over her, but she tried to hide her reaction from the RiverClan cats by feigning interest in a smooth pebble a couple of tail-lengths away.

"I'm glad you waited," she meowed. "So, is this the kit I've heard so

much about?"

Larkpaw's pelt grew hot with nervousness as she felt the other medicine cat's pale blue gaze turn to her, but she was too self-conscious to look up and meet it. She was relieved as Maplefrost let out a purr.

"Yes! She's finally old enough, so tonight we'll be making her into a real apprentice," the ThunderClan medicine cat explained.

"I'm happy you finally found a suitable apprentice," Lilybreath congratulated. "Breezepaw is almost ready for her full name, and I'm younger than you are!" Though her tone was teasing, there was a note of seriousness in the ginger-and-white she-cat's voice, and as Larkpaw risked a glance in their direction, she noticed for the first time that a few gray hairs were beginning to appear around Maplefrost's muzzle.

If Maplefrost was offended by the comment, she didn't show it, and instead gave Lilybreath a playful shove. "I might be getting old, but I still have plenty of moons ahead of me. *You're* the one to be worried about, eating all those oily fish!"

"Hmph, perhaps you ThunderClan cats should consider eating *more* fish. Your fur looks like you need it," Lilybreath purred. Maplefrost let out a huff, but didn't bother to retort, instead taking a look at the sky. The clouds which stretched from horizon to horizon made it impossible to pinpoint exactly where the sun was, but a bright haze peering through the gray blanket indicated it was around sunhigh.

"We should get going soon," the brown tabby suggested, flicking her tail toward the moor. "I don't think we can afford to wait around for Roseheart any more. Runningshadow will be getting impatient, after all."

"Eh, let him," Lilybreath replied, flicking her tail dismissively. "The old badger is far too critical as it is. But you're right, Roseheart is taking too long. She can catch up, if she cares about traveling with the rest of us."

Maplefrost nodded. "Very well. Let's go then. Come on, Larkpaw!"

Larkpaw trotted back over to the others, careful to avoid meeting the eyes of the larger, sleeker RiverClan cats as the four set off across the moor. The young apprentice fluffed out her pale pelt against the buffeting wind, almost fearful that it would sweep her right off her paws. None of the other cats, however, seemed concerned, simply narrowing their eyes against the grass that whipped at their muzzle and powering on.

Soon, Larkpaw could make out what appeared to be a particularly large boulder jutting out from the moor, silhouetted against the sky like a giant claw emerging from the ground. Perched on one of the crumbling stones at its base was a lithe cat, tail wrapped neatly around its paws. As the four medicine cats came into sight, the cat got to its paws and let out greeting meow.

"About time you got here!" the cat called- a tom, Larkpaw realized by his voice. This took her by surpise; she had never seen a full-grown tom so willowy. Even Owlfeather, who was skinny compared to the other toms in ThunderClan, was not so small.

"Yes, we were waiting for Roseheart," Lilybreath explained as the tom slipped off the rock and padded over to greet them. Now that he was no longer silhouetted against the sky, Larkpaw could make out gray fur; though strangely, his tail- and only his tail- was night-black. The tom touched noses with the two older she-cats, and flicked Breezepaw on the ear with his tail almost playfully, before turning his attention to Larkpaw. The young she-cat shrank back as the WindClan tom leaned forward to sniff her.

"So, this is your new apprentice, eh?" he asked, turning to Maplefrost with his eyebrows raised. "Doesn't look like much." Larkpaw let out a small, offended huff, but the tom didn't seem to notice. Maplefrost, on the other paw, let out an amused purr.

"Do any of us, Runningshadow?" she asked, bumping her shoulder against his. "Least of all you," she teased. The ThunderClan and RiverClan she-cats were both larger than the WindClan tom, who glowered at the jive.

"Fair enough," he conceded, flicking his tail. "In any case, we should get a move on. I'm sure you're quite eager to officially become a medicine cat, hm?" He turned again to Larkpaw, pale eyes searching hers for a heartbeat. For what, she couldn't guess, but she did manage a small nod.

"Hm. Quiet. I like that in a ThunderClan cat," the tom meowed, casting a glance not-at-all-subtly in Maplefrost's direction. Then without another word he turned and bounded away across the moor. Maplefrost rolled her eyes before following more slowly, and the others trailed along behind.

The five cats hadn't gone all that far before an acrid stench began to fill the air. Larkpaw quickened her pace, coming to trot alongside Maplefrost. Runningshadow still had the lead, only the tip of his black tail occasionally visible whisking through the grass ahead of them, while the two RiverClan she-cats chattered like birds a few tail-lengths behind.

"What's that scent?" Larkpaw asked, raising her head high to take a deep breath and immediately regretting it. The scent was getting stronger by the pawstep.

"The thunderpath," Maplefrost answered. "We'll have to cross it very soon."

Larkpaw's eyes widened in shock. "T-the thunderpath?" she squeaked. She didn't realize that this journey would take them across the thunderpath- a wide, rocky trail cutting through the forest, infested with twoleg monsters who hunted any cat foolish enough to wander onto their territory. Straining her ears, Larkpaw thought she could hear them growling, just like she had been told by the elders.

"It's not as bad as Leafshade and Silverstripe say," Maplefrost meowed, as if reading her apprentice's thoughts. She laid her tail across the younger she-cat's shoulder comfortingly. "The monsters don't actually hunt cats. They just... don't care if they trample them. So, be careful and do as I say. When we cross, run as quickly as your paws will let you, and you'll be alright."

Larkpaw nodded, relaxing slightly. Her newfound comfort didn't last long, however, as the grass parted before them, revealing a downward slope covered in short-cropped grass. At the bottom, a flat path of smooth, seamless gray stone stretched as far as Larkpaw could see from one direction to the other. A few large, shiny, beetle-like creatures roared up and down the path in different directions, and the apprentice had to lay back her ears against their incredible sound. Instinctively, her fur bristled with fear, and she couldn't help but cower behind Maplefrost slightly.

Runningshadow already waited near the bottom of the hill, shifting his paws impatiently as he watched the others approach. As they neared, he cast an anxious glance to the sky. "At the rate you all are going," he chastised, "we'll be lucky to reach Mothermouth by moonhigh, let alone the Moonstone cavern!"

"Ah, quit your moaning, Runningshadow," Lilybreath replied, rolling her eyes as she and Breezepaw trotted down the hill to join them. "We'll be there with time to spare, I'm sure. I know it's in your name, but really, you don't have to rush everywhere."

Runningshadow flicked his tail across her muzzle- a gesture something like "shut up,"- but Larkpaw could make out a gleam of amusement in his eyes as he turned toward the thunderpath. Briefly, she wondered if she would ever know the other medicine cats well enough to banter with them like they did among themselves... but that concern was quickly driven from her mind as she remembered what they were about to do.

"We're going to wait for a long gap between the monsters," Maplefrost explained as Runningshadow looked up and down the path at the approaching monsters. "As soon as there's enough of a chance, I'll tell you to go, and we'll all run across. You have to be quick, because sometimes they're going faster than you think. So, even if you *think* you have enough time, don't risk it."

Larkpaw nodded, eyes round with terror. She couldn't imagine taking her time to cross the thunderpath anyhow; she wouldn't want to spend any more time on the smelly, horrifying thing than she absolutely had to.

"Alright, get ready to run," Maplefrost instructed, nodding to a long gap between a few monsters farther down the path. "As soon as the first one passes, we'll go."

Larkpaw nodded again, unable to speak as the monsters drew closer. She thought her heart might stop, or else explode out of her chest if this ordeal took much longer. Then, the monster roared past, its foul breath washing over the cats and sunlight gleaming from its crimson flanks.

"Hey, wait!"

The meow startled Larkpaw, who looked over her shoulder and up the hill. A dark ginger she-cat was barreling towards them, amber eyes wide.

"Go!" Runningshadow called, taking off across the thunderpath. Larkpaw glanced at him, then back at the she-cat running toward them; then, Maplefrost gave her a shove.

"Run, Larkpaw!" she growled, pushing her onto the path. Larkpaw's pelt bristled with terror as she forced her paws to move, racing across the path after the WindClan medicine cat.

After what could have been a single heartbeat or one hundred moons- Larkpaw couldn't tell either way- her paws touched grass again. Relief washed over her, but still the young apprentice didn't stop running until she was well beyond the edge of the stone, safely hidden from the monsters in the long grass. She finally slowed to a stop, chest heaving, emotions boiling with a mixture of pure terror and elation at her survival. It was a few moments before she remembered the others, turning and padding back towards the path, ears pricked to discern their exact location.

"-someone could refrain from trying to get us all trampled," Runningshadow was saying crossly as Larkpaw poked her head out of the grass. He was glaring the ginger she-cat who had appeared just before the thunderpath, and she met his gaze levelly.

"You didn't have to go then," she retorted. "There would have been another opening before long."

"Or, you could have waited to catch up until after we had all crossed!" Runningshadow growled, lashing his tail. "But ShadowClan cats don't care if others get killed on their account, do they?"

"And you rabbit-chasers don't have the patience to not get yourselves killed on thunderpaths, do you?" the newcomer spat equally-venomously.

"Come now, both of you," Maplefrost meowed sternly, stepping between the two cats, who looked as though they were a mouse-length away from clawing each others' ears. "We all made it across, didn't we? No one got hurt." She glanced around at the others, looking startled for a moment as she realized Larkpaw was not among them. Then, she spotted her at the edge of the long grass and relaxed. "We're all here. So let's just go."

"Fine," the new she-cat meowed, glaring at Runningshadow as she slipped past him to follow Maplefrost. As they padded over, Maplefrost touched her nose to Larkpaw's ear.

"Are you alright?" she murmured, concern in her gaze. Larkpaw nodded, and Maplefrost let out a small sigh before looking up at the dark ginger she-cat. "Good. Larkpaw, this is Roseheart, the ShadowClan medicine cat."

The ShadowClan cat bent her head to touch noses with Larkpaw, all of her hostility towards Runningshadow suddenly gone as her amber eyes brightened. "It's lovely to finally meet you, Larkpaw!" she purred. "Maplefrost hasn't stopped telling us about you for *moons*."

"That's not quite true," Maplefrost meowed, flicking Roseheart's flank. "But I have been very pleased that you would be an apprentice soon," she added to Larkpaw. "But we don't have time to stand idle and chatter. Runningshadow will have our pelts if we delay any longer."

Chapter Three

[image]

Darkness was falling as the six cats reached Highstones. The jagged peaks had come into view shortly after they had crossed the thunderpath, but until their paws touched stone it never seemed that they were coming closer. Now, the cats huddled together on a wide, flat tract of stone, the cliffs stretching into the sky, tops ragged like the teeth of massive jaws about to close around them. Ahead was a large square of darkness in the side of the cliff, and Larkpaw couldn't help but think it was the throat of the beast about to swallow them whole.

"Mothermouth," Maplefrost whispered in her ear as the cats drew closer, pelts brushing together for warmth as the air cooled with the quickly-approaching night. "The Moonstone lies deep within."

"We have to go into the cave?" Larkpaw asked, looking up at her mentor with fear in her eyes. "But it's so dark! How far is it?"

"It's quite a way. But don't worry, young one. Follow us, and StarClan will guide your paws every step of the way." The older she-cat gave her apprentice a comforting lick between the ears before casting a glance at the overcast sky above. "I hope the sky clears by moonhigh," she meowed, now loud enough for the others to clearly hear.

"I think it should," Lilybreath replied, flicking her tail to the west, where it seemed some of the clouds were beginning to break up, just enough to reveal the colorful hues of sunset.

"If it's still cloudy at moonhigh, does that mean that StarClan is upset with us?" Breezepaw asked from ahead, worry coloring her tone. Lilybreath twitched her whiskers.

"No, of course not. Sometimes they just have nothing to say, and thus no need to clear the sky," she answered.

"It seems as though they may speak tonight, though," Runningshadow put in from the head of the group. "With the way the clouds are breaking up over there."

Roseheart nodded. "I hope it's nothing bad, if they do."

For once, Runningshadow couldn't seem to find a way to challenge the ShadowClan cat's statement, and instead just nodded once in agreement. The cats settled outside of the cave entrance to wait for a while longer; Larkpaw wasn't sure what for, but the rest of the cats said nothing and she dared not break the silence to ask. Finally, as the light began to fade, casting the cliffsides in pure black shadow, Maplefrost got to her paws.

"It's time," she meowed simply, flicking Larkpaw's flank with her tail-tip. "Come."

Larkpaw quickly hopped up, following her mentor as she padded over to the dark maw of Mothermouth. The medicine cat paused for a moment, gazing into the darkness, before she padded inside. Larkpaw hesitated a moment, eyes wide as she tried to discern any kind of light from within, but it seemed that the shadowy cave swallowed any light within its walls. Steeling herself, Larkpaw followed.

Several pawsteps in, cold washed over the young she-cat, and instinctively her pelt fluffed out against it. Her pale green eyes were stretched wide, but there was no light to be seen here; the only thing to guide her was the touch of Maplefrost's tail against her cheek, and the soft sound of her breath echoing against the stone walls. Behind her, she could hear the pawsteps of the other medicine cats, but in what order they had followed she couldn't guess. As her pelt brushed against one wall of the cave, she suddenly became very claustrophobic. Breath catching in her chest, she stifled her panic, instead focusing on the sound of Maplefrost's breathing.

StarClan will guide me, she thought, closing her eyes and straining her ears. Suddenly, the steep downward path flattened out, and after a few more moments, she instinctively felt the stone open up around her. Finally coming to a stop, Larkpaw slowly opened her

eyes.

As she had thought, the stone walls curved away from her on either side, quickly being lost in the darkness of the room. She was surprised, however, that she could see anything at all; a tiny pinprick of light came through a small, mouse-sized hole in the roof of the cavern, just bright enough that she could make out the shadowy shapes of the other cats around her. In the center of the room was an object she couldn't identify. It looked to be an unusually round stone, perhaps a tail-length tall and with sides that from here looked to be smooth.

"That is the Moonstone," Maplefrost explained quietly as the other cats fanned out, surrounding the object on all sides. "It doesn't look like much now, but just wait."

Larkpaw nodded, watching the stone carefully as the moments ticked by. She began to grow discouraged with the lack of activity when suddenly the cavern was filled with a brilliant white light. Larkpaw pressed her eyes shut, wincing with pain as her pelt bristled with shock. After a few heartbeats, however, the pain subsided and she eased open her eyes again, squinting as they adjusted. Then, they opened with surprise at what she was able to make out.

The stone, which had been plain, smooth, and black before, was now shining with countless flecks of white and silver light, each one reflecting from miniscule facets within the translucent stone itself. Chips of light illuminated the smooth cavern walls and shone on the cats that surrounded it, bleaching their fur and making it look as though each was made of moonlight. *That must be what StarClan cats look like,* she thought.

Now, Maplefrost stepped foward so that she nearly touched the stone, bowing her head for a moment before turning to Larkpaw. "Come forward," she ordered, her tone solemn. Larkpaw hesitated for a moment, still awestruck by the stone, but then slowly approached, standing a mere tail-length from the brilliant object.

"Larkpaw, is it your wish to enter the mysteries of StarClan as a medicine cat?" Maplefrost asked. Larkpaw dipped her head,

suddenly overwhelmed with emotion as she gazed at her mentor's silhouette, black against the brilliant light of StarClan.

"It is," she replied formally.

Maplefrost nodded, pleased, before turning again to face the stone. "Warriors of StarClan, I present you with this apprentice. She has chosen the path of a medicine cat. Please grant her your wisdom and insight so that she may understand your ways, and heal her Clanmates in accordance with your will. Larkpaw, come press your nose to the Moonstone," the medicine cat ordered. Larkpaw did as she said, nearly shying away at the shockingly cold touch of the stone.

Maplefrost, as well as the other medicine cats, came forward as well, each touching their nose to the stone as they crouched down and closed their eyes. Larkpaw copied them, and almost as soon as she had, she found herself standing in a wide clearing at dusk. For a moment, she was shocked, and terrified, unsure of how she got there. Then, she came to a realization.

I'm dreaming.

She looked around, trying to figure out why StarClan would have called her here. There was nothing strange about the clearing; it seemed to be leaf-fall, with many of the leaves of the trees at the edge of the clearing beginning to turn red and yellow. Opening her mouth, Larkpaw could smell the stench of a nearby thunderpath, and faintly hear the rumble of monsters. As her eyes adjusted to the dark, she was able to make out the dark shapes of a group of cats sitting on the other side of the clearing.

Those must be StarClan cats, she thought, eyes widening with surprise.

"Hello!" she called out. "Did you want to speak with me?"

To her surprise, none of the cats moved; they didn't seem to have heard her. Frowning, she began to trot over, but after a heartbeat realized that though her paws were moving, it didn't seem that she could actually move from that spot in the clearing. "Hello?" she

called out again, this time out of desperation, but none of the cats moved. Then, suddenly something moved in the shadows, quickly rushing towards the group of waiting cats. Larkpaw couldn't make out what it was... it almost looked to be a black mist. Before she could call out a warning, the fog enveloped the cats, blocking them from her view. Screeches rang out across the clearing, accompanied by the hisses and snarls of fighting cats. Larkpaw watched, horrified as she tried to make out anything that was happening through the smoke, but she was blind and helpless. Then, as quickly as it had come, the smoke cleared. Where it had been, the ground was littered with the bodies of the fallen.

Suddenly, Larkpaw found that she could move. She quickly rushed over to the prone shapes of the cats, paws slipping on the blood-soaked grass. Most of the cats lay dead, their pelts and faces torn beyond recognition. Still, her horror grew as here and there she spotted a familiar pelt: there lay her aunt, Ambercloud, and here was Briartooth. Cinderclaw, Fernheart, Frostface lay dead as well, along with even more cats she didn't recognize. Then, she spotted movement: a massive tom, his pelt rising and falling faintly with each ragged breath. Larkpaw raced over, her breath catching as the tom looked up at her and she was met with a familiar amber gaze.

"Sandstar!" she gasped, pelt bristling. The tom's throat was slashed, and one of his eyes was bloody and clawed. Still, he was unmistakable.

"S-s-stop t-them," the tawny tom gasped, blood bubbling in his lips.

"Stop who?" Larkpaw asked, her voice threatening to turn to a desperate wail, but Sandstar didn't seem to hear her. His gaze fixed on hers for a heartbeat, before clouding over. Then he fell back to the ground, his breath fading.

"No! Sandstar!" Larkpaw cried, prodding her uncle- and the Clan leader- with one white paw. "Don't die! Tell me who I need to stop!" She let out a sob, collapsing to the ground beside him. "P-please tell me...."

There was no response, and a heartbeat later when she opened her eyes again, she was met only with darkness. Pelt bristling, Larkpaw

leapt to her paws, for a moment terrified that the black fog had engulfed her. After a moment, though, she could make out faint starlight shining through the hole in the roof. She was awake, back in the Moonstone cavern.

Larkpaw forced herself to relax, narrowing her eyes as she looked around at the others. It seemed they were all still asleep, each one occasionally twitching an ear or paw or tail in their dreaming. Larkpaw wondered what StarClan was saying to them- if anything- and if it was similar to what she had been shown.

Was it a vision from StarClan? the apprentice wondered, gazing up at the few twinkling stars which she could see shining through the gap in the ceiling. *Or was it just a nightmare?* She knew that StarClan's messages could sometimes be terrifying... but didn't they usually involve actually speaking to StarClan? Yet, so far as she could tell, she hadn't seen a single one of her warrior ancestors- only now-living cats who were killed in her dream. Perhaps it really had been just a nightmare.

Suddenly, Larkpaw felt a need for fresh air. She watched the sleeping medicine cats for a moment longer, wondering if she could- or should- head back to the surface on her own. After a few heartbeats, though, she felt she couldn't stand to be in the stuffy, dark cave any longer. She needed to get out.

The young medicine cat made her way to the surface as quickly as she could, pressing her eyes shut as her pelt brushed again against the walls of the narrow passageway. She imagined Maplefrost's pawsteps leading her through the tunnel as before, and before long a wave of fresh air washed over her. Larkpaw stopped at the mouth of the tunnel, taking a deep breath as she opened her eyes to the night sky. Beyond the black walls of the valley, she could see the landscape rolling into the horizon. She could make out the silhouettes of trees past the hills, hazy with distance, and she wondered if that was ThunderClan's territory. Right now, she wished more than anything that she was home, curled up next to Nightpaw and Tigerpaw. With a pang, she realized that not only was that not the case now, but it never would be again. She and her sisters had chosen different paths, and though they would always remain kin and Clanmates, never again would they share what they

had had before.

Turning her gaze instead to the sky, Larkpaw took in the brilliance of Silverpelt above. It seemed so much clearer here, filled with far more stars than she had ever seen before in her life- truly like the sparkling pelt of a massive cat, splayed across the night sky. Letting out a sigh, Larkpaw settled next to the entrance of the cave to wait out the night.

"Oh, StarClan," she murmured, closing her eyes for a brief moment as a faint breeze whispered over her pelt. "What is it you want me to do?"

Chapter Four

[image]

It was nearly dawn by the time the other cats emerged from the tunnel, awakening Larkpaw from where she had begun to fall asleep on her paws. The trek from camp was farther than she had ever walked before, and she was exhausted. She certainly was not looking forward to the trip back.

Maplefrost appeared first, her pelt ruffled and her half-panicked gaze softening with relief when she saw her apprentice leaning against the side of the cliff, eyes closed and fur fluffed against the cold.

"There you are!" she exclaimed as she bounded over, nudging Larkpaw to rouse her. The young apprentice stirred slightly, blinking open her green eyes and letting out a wide yawn. As she looked up at Maplefrost's familiar face, she suddenly felt comforted... after the haze of a short sleep, her nightmare seemed so distant, and for a moment she couldn't even remember if it had actually happened, or if she had imagined it.

"Um, yeah," Larkpaw replied, hopping to her paws and shaking the dust out of her fur. She wondered whether she should tell Maplefrost about her dream... but she wasn't even sure if it was real. "I just needed some fresh air. Sorry." She ducked her head and licked down a tuft of fur on her chest that was sticking up, not meeting Maplefrost's eyes.

The apprentice shuffled her paws awkwardly as her mentor continued to stare at her, curiosity in her yellow eyes. "Did you have a dream?"

Larkpaw's heart nearly stopped at the question, and she balked, uncertain how to answer. Should she tell Maplefrost about her dream, as uncertain as she was that it was real? "I... um...."

Maplefrost's gaze softened as she watched Larkpaw stutter. "It's alright if you didn't. Most apprentices don't on their first night."

Larkpaw stared at her for a moment, not sure whether to be comforted or more confused. But, if that was true... then her nightmare must have been only that and nothing more. *That's it,* she rationalized. *Just a nightmare. It only happened because you're scared, leaving camp for the first time to come all this way. Worried something bad might happen while you're gone*. That seemed reasonable, and after a heartbeat the young she-cat dipped her head, her uncertainty eased.

Maplefrost glanced over her shoulder at the others, who were waiting a couple of fox-lengths away. Runningshadow was beginning to look impatient, and Breezepaw seemed as though she might fall asleep where she was standing. "We should get going," the ThunderClan medicine cat meowed to her apprentice, nudging her forward. "There's still a long way back."

Larkpaw could have sworn that the journey home took nothing short of moons. The sun had just burst over the horizon by the time Runningshadow and Roseheart bid the group farewell, heading in opposite directions back to their own camps. They said goodbye to Lilybreath and Breezepaw at Fourtrees, and the sun had nearly cleared the trees by the time Maplefrost and Larkpaw made it back to their own camp. By now, thoughts of being reunited with her sisters had been entirely overpowered by the singular desire to collapse in a nest of soft moss and not move again for the rest of the day.

"Larkpaw is back!"

Excited squeals brought Larkpaw partially back to her senses as she padded into the camp. Looking up, she saw Nightpaw and Tigerpaw barreling towards her from the direction of the apprentices' den. Her reactions delayed as they were, she didn't manage to even so much as call out a greeting before the two pounced, knocking all three of them to the ground.

"O-oh, hi," Larkpaw murmured as her sisters nuzzled her happily. Maplefrost stood a tail-length away, looking amused, even as Nutfur

and Cinderclaw- Tigerpaw and Nightpaw's mentors respectively- padded over.

"We missed you so much!" Tigerpaw explained, softly batting at Larkpaw's ear. "We were afraid that something bad would happen on the way. Like a badger! Or a ShadowClan cat!"

Larkpaw only let out a huff, thinking of Roseheart and the thunderpath. They weren't that far off... but she wouldn't tell them that.

"Speak for yourself," Nightpaw retorted, flicking Tigerpaw with her tail. "I knew you would be fine. You might have decided to become a medicine cat, but *I* know you could still take care of yourself like a warrior!" Larkpaw let out a small purr, finding Nightpaw's faith in her reassuring. Still, she wasn't sure she would agree. The journey to the Moonstone and back had been long, and even though the older cats seemed to make the trek just fine, Larkpaw found it difficult and exhausting. She couldn't imagine ever being able to find her way as easily as Maplefrost.

"Nightpaw, Tigerpaw." It was Maplefrost who spoke next, and both of the apprentices immediately perked their ears to listen, looking surprised. "I know you're glad to see your sister, but you should let her get some rest. It's been a long night."

"Oh, alright..." Nightpaw let out a sigh as she stood, taking a step back from Larkpaw. Tigerpaw gave Larkpaw's cheek another quick nudge before doing the same, and then Larkpaw staggered to her paws.

"Hmph. We wanted to take them out before dawn, but they insisted on staying in camp until you two got back," Cinderclaw meowed to Maplefrost. His tone was exasperated, but the twitch of his whiskers and gleam in his eye betrayed his amusement.

"Precisely, so we should really get going now," Nutfur put in. "Or we won't be able to show you all the borders before nightfall."

"Okay, we're coming. Goodnight, Larkpaw!" Nightpaw meowed, before scrunching her nose. "Or... good morning, I guess? Anyways,

sleep well!"

"And you better tell us all about the trip when you wake up," Tigerpaw added, flicking Larkpaw on the nose with her tail. Then she turned and trotted after Cinderclaw, Nutfur, and Nightpaw, who had already slipped past Maplefrost and were heading for the camp exit.

"Cinderclaw might seem a bit stoic about it now," Maplefrost meowed as she nudged Larkpaw in the direction of the medicine cat den, "but he and Owlfeather were precisely the same way the first time I went to the Moonstone."

"Really?" Larkpaw asked, eyes wide. She knew that the three were littermates, but even so, she couldn't imagine any of them as young, inexperienced warriors. Or, in Maplefrost's case, a young, inexperienced medicine cat. And the thought of Cinderclaw worrying so much about anything other than patrols was almost amusing to her.

Maplefrost purred in response. "Really. We didn't all start out as grumpy, responsible old cats!" Larkpaw let out a huff of amusement at that, but it was quickly forgotten as they emerged from the fern tunnel and entered the medicine clearing. The large rock which made up their den took up most of the space, and the dark, fragrant cave had never seemed so inviting. Larkpaw didn't even wait for Maplefrost as she bounded over and padded inside. Her nest was in the corner, and it looked as though someone had added some fresh moss to it during the night. *Probably Nightpaw and Tigerpaw*, she thought, a purr rising in her throat. She circled in her nest a few times before plopping down, just as Maplefrost slid into the den, blocking out most of the light.

"So," Maplefrost meowed as she settled down in her nest as well. "How was your first *official* day of being a medicine cat apprentice?"

Larkpaw stifled a yawn. "It was... hard, and tiring. But... I never thought it would be easy. In the end, I know I made the right choice," she replied, her voice echoing slightly in the darkness.

Maplefrost purred. "Good. That's how it will always feel. That's

what it means to be a medicine cat."

Larkpaw nodded, before lowering her head onto her paws and closing her eyes. *It's not meant to be easy. But in the end... I guess that's part of what will make it be so rewarding.*

Chapter Five

The next half moon passed without incident, and Larkpaw grew in skill in confidence. She learned quickly, and even after a few days could identify more than half of the herbs in the medicine den by scent, though she still had no idea what most of them were used for. Maplefrost taught her to treat a few simple wounds, mostly just thorns in paw-pads and the like, and to look for signs of coughs or infections. The medicine cat said it would be a moon or so before she would let Larkpaw really get into using herbs- after all, in order to treat an injury or illness, she must first identify it. And so that's what she did: memorized lists of symptoms and some basic herbs, and every now and then removed a thorn.

Still, she would never complain. It was tedious but she knew it was necessary, and she could tell that she was getting better at remembering what herbs she had been taught. Each time she removed a thorn it got easier, and her patient winced less (except for Tigerpaw, who always seemed to have thorns in her paws, and who always whined and moaned when they were taken out). She was excited for the upcoming Gathering, where she would get to meet the other four Clans besides the medicine cats. She couldn't wait to boast about her new skills- or at least, that's what she intended, though she knew that realistically she probably would hardly be able to get a word out. Even so, as the Gathering drew to only a few days away, she could hardly contain her excitement. Tigerpaw and Nightpaw were not quiet about their jealousy, and Ashpaw and Rainpaw complained that even *they* hadn't gotten to go to a Gathering yet. Larkpaw supposed it was just one of the perks of being a medicine cat.

It was with this prideful anticipation that Larkpaw had fallen asleep curled next to Maplefrost one night, three days before the Gathering. Her dreams were chaotic and colorful, but pleasant- moonlight in the forest, dappling the grassy floor of the massive hollow she had only barely glimpsed from the foliage above.

Unfamiliar cats and scents, all sizes and colors and Clans. Larkpaw wove between them, greeting cats she knew and some she didn't.

Suddenly, the pale apprentice heard yowling from somewhere else in the hollow. She perked her ears and craned her neck, looking for the source, but none of the other cats seemed to notice. *I thought fighting was forbidden here?* she thought, circling in place as she looked for the commotion. "You don't hear that?" she asked a she-cat standing next to her. Suddenly, she realized it was Maplefrost.

"Larkpaw, wake up!"

Larkpaw scrambled into a sitting position, heart pounding with the shock of the sudden awakening. For a moment she was confused, not sure if she was still dreaming. There were too many cats here, too much commotion. Surely this was still the Gathering in her dream? But the scent of herbs walked over her, and her pelt bristled as another scent did as well, one she had become familiar with even during her brief training: blood. More than she had ever smelled before, washing over her in pungent waves, threatening to overwhelm even the strong scents of the herbs.

"What's happening?" Larkpaw demanded, hopping to her paws, but Maplefrost was no longer at her side. She had slipped into the clearing, the other cats parting quickly to let her through. In the darkness, Larkpaw thought she could recognize the shapes of Ambercloud, Flowerfoot, and Oaktail. They stood around three more cats who laid in motionless heaps on the grass, blood staining their fur. The pattern of light and dark fur on one of the cats she immediately recognized as well.

"Rainpaw!" she exclaimed, her voice somewhere between a shocked whisper and a cry of anguish, but none of the older cats paid her any mind. She looked closer, and could tell that the other two cats were some of the older apprentices: Patchpaw and Mousepaw.

"Larkpaw, quickly, get cobwebs," Maplefrost ordered from the clearing. "Ambercloud, come put pressure here. Oaktail, press there." Larkpaw scrambled back into the den, snuffling blindly along the wall until she found the crevice where the cobwebs were stored. Not knowing how many she needed, she grabbed the entire

bundle gently between her teeth and hurried back outside.

"Why aren't you treating Patchpaw?" Ambercloud was demanding, her tone both angry and panicked. Her golden pelt was bristling as she stared at Maplefrost, who had both of her paws pressing against Mousepaw's shoulder. With a pained look, Maplefrost shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Ambercloud, but he's already gone. All I can do is try to save the other two."

The queen let out an anguished wail, lashing her tail as she turned her face to the starry sky. "No! You can't mean that, Maplefrost! There must be *something* you can do!" she snarled, stepping towards her son's body. Maplefrost barred her with her tail, giving her a stern look.

"Ambercloud, I know it hurts, but right now Mousepaw and Rainpaw need you more. Grieve later. Focus now." The other she-cat stared at her for a moment before dipping her head, letting out a deep breath. She returned to where she was before, pressing her paw down on Rainpaw's flank as she had been instructed.

Larkpaw trotted over, dropping the bundle of cobwebs at her mentor's paws. Maplefrost nodded approvingly. "Good. Unroll them and spread them out over his foreleg like I taught you," she ordered. Larkpaw did as she was told, paws shaking as she peeled layers of sticky strands apart. She pressed them to Mousepaw's leg, but even as sticky as they were they only seemed to slip on his blood-soaked fur. Finally, she managed to make them cling in place, and Maplefrost then ordered her to bandage another spot. Larkpaw had to force herself not to look away from the vicious wounds on the young tom's body- some parts of his flesh were shredded nearly to the bone. She couldn't imagine what could possibly have done something like this, but whatever it was, the mere thought that it was still out there somewhere filled her with more terror than she had ever felt in her life.

She had barely started to bandage the second wound when Mousepaw let out a few short, anguished gasps. For a moment his blue eyes opened, staring blankly at Larkpaw. Despite herself, she

froze, staring back, just able to make out words through the blood bubbling at his lips. "Don't.... Patchpaw...." His muscles convulsed, and then went limp, and for a heartbeat Larkpaw could do nothing but stare at him as his eyes clouded over.

"He's dead," Maplefrost meowed, voice tight with grief, but she didn't sound surprised. It took her only a mere heartbeat to get her bearings, turning to where Ambercloud was still applying pressure to Rainpaw's wounds. The medicine cat flicked her apprentice with her tail, indicated she should bring the cobwebs over here.

"Alright, it looks like her bleeding has already mostly stopped," Maplefrost meowed, giving a nod to Ambercloud. "Good job. Larkpaw, webs here and here." She gestured to two spots, and then began to strip off cobwebs for herself, which she applied to different wounds. Rainpaw's injuries didn't appear to be quite as bad as Mousepaw's, though they were still severe, and Larkpaw couldn't imagine how any cat could hope to survive from something like that. Larkpaw feared that each shallow breath that escaped the young tabby would be her last, yet when she had finished bandaging her wounds, Rainpaw was miraculously still alive.

Maplefrost stepped back, giving a deep sigh. "I've done all I can do for now," she told the others. "It's in the paws of StarClan." Oaktail and Flowerfoot had moved their apprentices' bodies out of Maplefrost's way and had settled down in the grass beside them, as if guarding their spirits from anything else that might want to harm them. Ambercloud had lingered at Rainpaw's side, peering over Larkpaw's shoulder- though it made the young medicine cat feel self-conscious about her work, she couldn't blame her aunt. After all, with both of her sons gone, her only remaining hope was that her apprentice might live.

"We should get her inside," Ambercloud meowed shakily after a few heartbeats. "Make her comfortable. At least, as much as she can be in this state. And clean her up."

Maplefrost nodded. "Yes, I'll help. Larkpaw," she meowed, turning her yellow gaze to her apprentice. "Clean yourself up a bit... then go fetch Ashpaw and Daisypaw." She glanced at the warriors. "They'll... be okay without you. Oaktail, please find Cinderclaw, Pineleaf, and

Owlfeather. They'll want to know what happened. Flowerfoot, inform Sandstar. Quickly, quickly."

Both warriors looked equally reluctant to abandon their posts at their dead apprentices' sides, but they obeyed regardless, getting to their paws and heading down the fern tunnel. Larkpaw quickly settled outside the stone den as Maplefrost and Ambercloud carefully carried Rainpaw inside. The apprentice tried to clean some of Mousepaw's blood from her paws, but she wasn't sure that fur would ever be white again. After a few moments, she stood again and headed out into the main part of camp.

As she passed through the fern tunnel, Owlfeather rushed past her, a deep growl rumbling in his throat as if he were headed into battle. Pineleaf and Cinderclaw weren't far behind, and it was with a heavy heart not entirely recovered from the shock and suddenness of it all that Larkpaw headed for the apprentices' den.

It was only the second time she had ever been inside. It was shadowed and cozy, but still not quite as dark or well insulated as the medicine den. Tigerpaw and Nightpaw were asleep next to the entrance of the den, curled up beside each other. Tigerpaw snored loudly, ruffling the fur of Nightpaw's plumy tail, which was draped across her nose. The sight filled Larkpaw with a mixture of emotions: jealousy and comfort, peace and anxiety for their safety. What if it had been them who had been attacked so viciously? What if they had been slaughtered like Mousepaw and Patchpaw, and maybe Rainpaw as well?

"Larkpaw?"

It was the familiar voice of Ashpaw which roused the young she-cat from her thoughts. She looked over at the gray tom, her breath suddenly catching in her chest. He looked sleepy and calm, so blissfully ignorant. What could she possibly say to him? Even as she stared at him, his gaze sharpened, and he quickly scrambled to his paws. "Larkpaw! Is that... blood? Is it your blood? Are you okay?" His tone must have roused the others- Daisypaw, who was asleep a couple tail-lengths away from him, stirred in her nest, slowly looking up. Nightpaw moved as well, detangling herself from Tigerpaw.

"Larkpaw what are you... are you alright? Who's blood is that?" she meowed, sitting up quickly. Tigerpaw let out a huff of annoyance as she was knocked away, but the scent of blood quickly brought her to her senses as well.

"I-it's Mousepaw's," Larkpaw replied, her voice quivering. "And Rainpaw's."

"What? What happened?" Daisypaw demanded, leaping to her paws at the mention of her brother. "Where is he? Is he alright?" She glanced around the den before turning her attention back to Larkpaw. "Where's Patchpaw?" Larkpaw just shook her head slowly, unable to meet Daisypaw's eye. The she-cat stared at her for a moment before rushing past her, slipping out of the den. Ashpaw, for once, seemed to have nothing to say, and instead just stared at Larkpaw with a confused and scared expression.

"Is she okay?" he breathed after a moment, his tail-tip twitching back and forth with agitation. Larkpaw let out a sigh.

"I d-don't know. She's alive, but I don't know if Maplefrost thinks she'll survive. Mousepaw and Patchpaw are...." she trailed off, letting out another breath. "They didn't make it."

"What happened?" Tigerpaw meowed, finally seeming to be aware of the situation. Larkpaw glanced at her sister.

"I... don't know. They didn't say. It was too much of a panic t-trying to save them." Her voice caught again as she thought of the blood gushing from Mousepaw's wounds, and the way he had convulsed as he died. He must have been in so much pain, so much fear. *No cat should have to die like that.*

She looked away, unable to meet the curious and worried gazes of the other apprentices. "You should go be with her, Ashpaw. Pineleaf and Cinderclaw are there now. I... don't know how much time she has left."

Ashpaw nodded, quickly brushing past her. He seemed surprisingly calm, though his eyes betrayed his near-panic. Still, his hurry didn't stop him from turning to Larkpaw just before his slipped out of the

den. "Will you be okay?" he meowed, too quietly for the others to hear. Larkpaw blinked, surprised at the question. She wasn't sure how to answer.

"Go," she replied just as quietly, giving the older tom a nudge. He stared at her a split second longer before slipping out of the den, and a heartbeat later she could hear the pounding of his paws as he raced towards the medicine den.

"I-I should go too," Larkpaw meowed, still not returning her sisters' concerned stares. "Maplefrost might need my help."

Nightpaw nodded. "Yeah, go. Just... be careful. Let us know what happens as soon as it does."

"I hope Rainpaw's okay," Tigerpaw nodded, eyes round. "Take care of her. I'm not sure anyone else would be able to reason with Ashpaw if she... ya know."

Larkpaw let out a sigh. "Yeah. I guess... I'll see you." She quickly squeezed out of the den, pausing outside and letting the cool night air wash over her for a heartbeat. The stars above twinkled so clearly, so brightly, and she wondered if they were welcoming the spirits of Patchpaw and Mousepaw at this moment. She hoped that the two apprentices weren't trapped in their mangled and blood-soaked bodies until dawn. Gazing up at the stars, she couldn't help but remember her first night as a medicine cat, and the eerie and terrifying nightmare she had had at the Moonstone. At the time she had dismissed it as just that, a nightmare, but now....

Is this what you were trying to warn me about? she thought as she gazed up at Silverpelt. *Is this what you wanted me to stop? I don't even know what killed them yet... let alone what I could have done to prevent it.* She averted her gaze, unable to face StarClan any longer a heavy weight settled in her chest: the feeling that whatever had happened, it had happened because she had failed to prevent it. Was Mousepaw and Patchpaw's death her fault? Was their blood on her paws in more ways than one?

She jumped as a another wail echoed across the camp, ripping her from her moment of relative peace. It was familiar: the sound that

had escaped Ambercloud when she realized that Patchpaw was gone. But this time, Larkpaw recognized the voice as Pineleaf's. Pelt bristling, she bounded for the fern tunnel, nearly running into Ashpaw as he emerged from the shadows, his blue eyes wild with fear and grief. For a heartbeat, the two stared at each other in silence, realization settling upon them both. Then, Ashpaw spoke the words Larkpaw had feared:

"Rainpaw is dead."

Chapter Six

[image]

The sky was just beginning to turn gray with dawn light as the members of ThunderClan gathered in the clearing. Pineleaf's cry of grief had woken many cats, while the rest were roused from their sleep by those who were already awake. Now, they huddled in clusters in the camp, eyes dull with sleep and pelts ungroomed, whispering about what could possibly have happened. Ambercloud had not left the apprentices' sides since moonhigh, and Oaktail and Flowerfoot had said nothing about the incident- each time they were asked, they would only reply that Sandstar would say soon enough.

As rays of orange and red spread across the sky in the east, the bodies of the three apprentices were carried into the clearing by their mentors and kin. Larkpaw sat next to the fern tunnel, her pelt now groomed of blood, her head bowed as each of the young cats was carried past her and laid gently in the clearing. She was not deaf to the shocked murmurs which spread through the Clan, their fur bristling as they realized that all three of the apprentices were dead. Larkpaw looked up as they began to quiet, just in time to see Sandstar taking his perch on the top of Highrock. Silence once again settled over camp as the cats waited with morbid curiosity, eyes flicking anxiously between the bodies of their Clanmates and the shadowed forest beyond.

For a moment, Sandstar was silent as well, gazing forlornly at the three young cats lying still in the center of the camp. Then he began to speak, grief barely concealing the fury in his tone.

"Cats of ThunderClan," he began. "As you can see, tonight we have suffered a terrible tragedy: the loss of three of our Clanmates. And not just any Clanmates, but three spirited and promising apprentices, who had many moons ahead of them and much to give to our Clan." He let out a quiet sigh, one which easily carried through the stillness of the clearing. The cats barely dared to

breathe, waiting to hear what had caused this terrible tragedy.

"It was just before moonhigh when Patchpaw, Mousepaw, and Rainpaw were discovered missing," Sandstar continued. "Most likely, they snuck out of their nests for a night in the forest on their own. They had the misfortune of picking the worst night possible." He shook his head slowly. "Ambercloud, Oaktail, and Flowerfoot went to search for their apprentices, and what they found was shocking. A clearing soaked in blood, and our apprentices horribly wounded. The area was rank with the stench of blood, but below that... ShadowClan."

Larkpaw looked up at the announcement, surprised. She had heard terrible things about the Clan across the thunderpath ever since she was a kit: they were sneaky, manipulative, and savage. They would never miss an opportunity to further their own agenda, and would take what they wanted by force if necessary. Even so, she found it difficult to believe that mere cats would be capable of such brutality. Meanwhile, several other cats gasped with a similar surprise, and others still let out low yowls of fury.

"They'll pay for this!"

"Kill the crow-food eaters!"

"Murderers!"

"Sneak into camp and kill their kits, see how *they* like it!"

"Which cats did it? They must be punished!"

A chorus of outrage rang out, which Sandstar quickly quieted by raising his tail. "I led a patrol there before dawn to investigate. We tried to identify the individual scents... after all, Mothstar herself may not be in on it. It may have been a group of wayward warriors, and I doubt she wants them in her Clan any more than we do." He paused. "Unfortunately, their scents were hidden. I doubt they could be identified even by their own Clanmates. There was too much blood, and they had covered their trail with other scents as well. Garlic and herbs, and crowfood."

"We should go straight to their camp and root out the murderers," Owlfeather put in, stepping forward. He was practically shaking with fury. He extended his claws, digging them into the soil. "I'll kill them myself."

Sandstar cast the Owlfeather a scolding glare, and the smoky tom fell silent, though that didn't stop his tail from lashing back and forth with fury. The leader turned his gaze back to the rest of the Clan, again pausing for a moment. "Believe me, if I thought there was a chance that they would give up their Clanmates, I would march there right now." Again, he shook his head. "But their fatal flaw is that they have always been too prideful. If there are murderers in their ranks, Mothstar will take care of it quietly, herself. She would never give them over to our justice."

"So what do we do?" It was Frostface who piped up now. "We can't just let them get away with it. We have other Clanmates to consider. Other kits. I don't want to have to worry about what might be lurking on our own territory."

"Don't get me wrong, I have no intention of letting them go," Sandstar assured the pale queen. "But I will not confront them just yet. The Gathering is two days hence.... I will confront her there. They will be unwilling and unable to fight then, and when all four Clans know that there are murderers in ShadowClan, they will have no choice but to root them out themselves. It may not be the justice we desire, but it may still be justice yet."

Murmurs again spread through the clearing as cats commented on the wisdom of Sandstar's plan. Some seemed to agree that it was the only way to avoid them being ignored and turned away at best, and attacked at worst. Others felt that letting the murderers have even two day's peace was too much.

"As for Mousepaw, Patchpaw, and Rainpaw... we will sit vigil for the day, and bury them at dusk." Sandstar slid down from the rock and made to head for his den, but before he could, Ambercloud blocked his path. Larkpaw could see that the queen was shaking, but still she stared Sandstar dead in the eye, and her voice did not waver as she spoke.

"And what of my sons? They were days from earning their warrior names," she meowed, loud enough for all to hear. "You can see their wounds. You can see that Mousepaw is torn to shreds! They fought their murderers bravely, and they suffered all the more for it. Don't they at least deserve to go to StarClan as warriors?"

Sandstar stood still for a moment, considering his sister's words before he finally dipped his head and turned back to the Clan. "What Ambercloud says is right. I can only lament that I didn't realize it myself." He stepped forward and bent his head so that he nearly touched Mousepaw's mangled shoulder. Larkpaw had helped Ambercloud and Maplefrost to clean and smooth their pelts over the night, dressing them with fragrant herbs to mask the scent of blood and death, but even so their fatal wounds were easy to see.

"I, Sandstar, leader of ThunderClan, ask StarClan to look down upon these two apprentices," he began. "They trained hard to learn the ways of your noble code, and have given up their lives in service of their Clan." He paused for a moment before dipping his head to brush his nose against Mousepaw's ear. "This apprentice will be known as Mousetail. His Clan honored his energy and courage." Now, he shifted and instead touched his nose to Patchpaw's cheek. "And this apprentice will be known as Patchfur. His Clan honored his forethought and determination. Let StarClan receive them as warriors." With that, Sandstar raised his head and stepped back, as the Clan began to chant the two warriors' names. It was not cheerful and celebratory, as when Briartooth had been made a warrior. No, it was solemn and melancholy; rather than a celebration of achievement, a lamentation of what should have been.

Larkpaw almost hadn't noticed as Ashpaw had padded up to her, settling in the soft grass beside her as Sandstar named the new warriors. Now, he didn't join in the cheering, and only stared at the small body of his sister with hollow, empty eyes. Larkpaw shuffled her paws, not sure what to say to him. He hadn't spoken a word since last night, and she couldn't imagine how it must feel to lose a littermate. She couldn't even think of what she might do if she lost Tigerpaw or Nightpaw, but even if one of them died, at least the other two would still have each other. Ashpaw now was left with no

one. After a few heartbeats, he seemed to notice her staring sideways at him, and slowly looked up to meet his gaze. For a moment he was silent; then he spoke, his voice quiet and hopeless.

"What do I do now?"